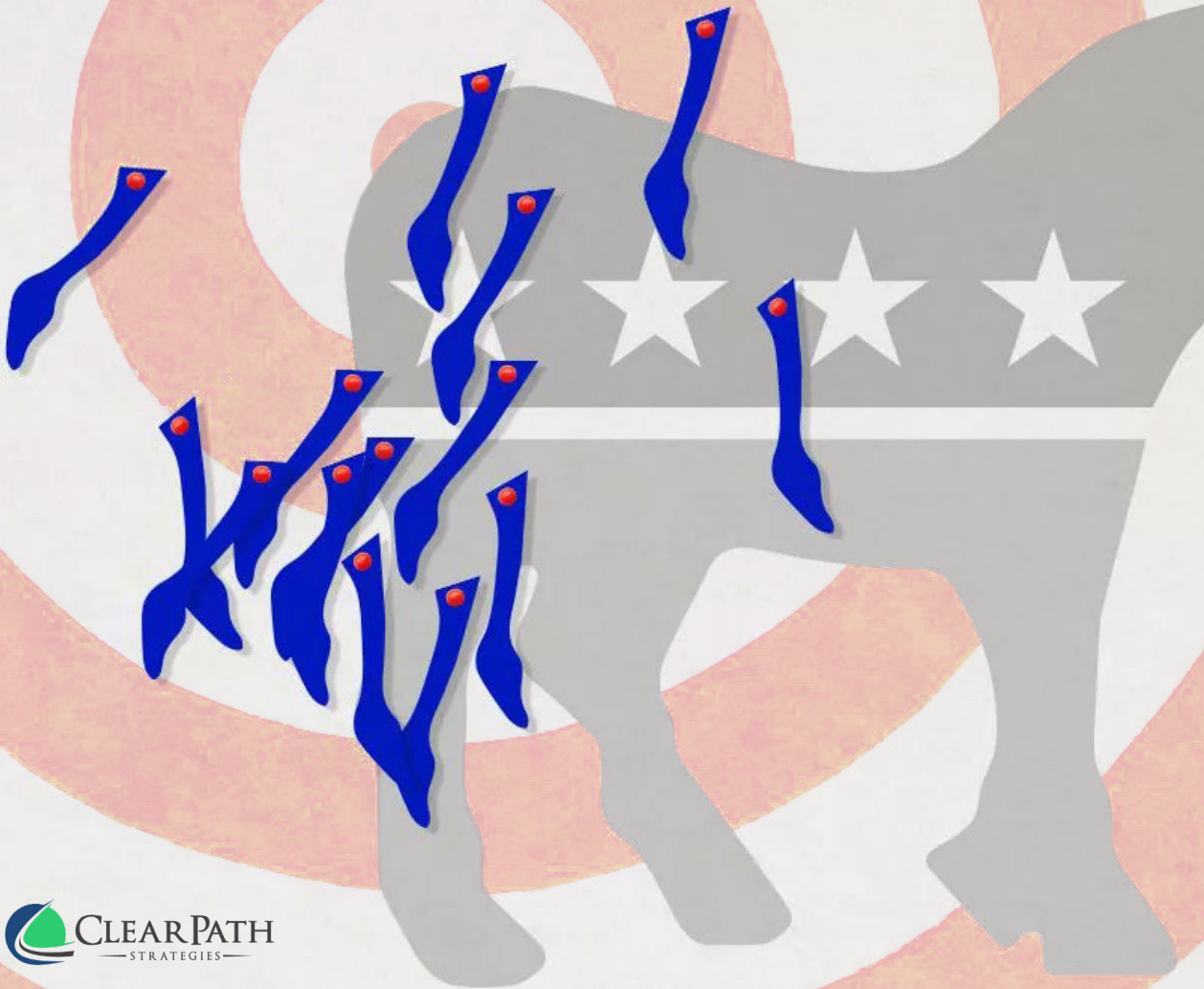


THE US MIDTERMS: A GLOBAL VIEW

An outside perspective on the US midterms
brought to you by ClearPath Strategies

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CONTENTS

A Month Later:
Strong Dem Candidates Defy
History, But Hurt The Long-Term
Prospects Of The Party

MIDTERMS

1 Week Out:
Campaigning Against Extremists

3 Weeks Out:
Understanding who votes

4 Weeks Out:
How good candidates weaponize 'values'

5 Weeks Out:
The Issue Battlefield(s)

6 Weeks Out:
Could the Dems win this thing?

7 Weeks Out:
How Could The GOP Lose This Thing?

8 Weeks Out:
Framing Your Thinking

US politics is messy and on a dangerous path. Our aim in writing this series is two-fold. First, to provide a focused analysis of the election absent generic punditry. Second, to raise the alarm on the Democratic party's errant strategy (or lack thereof). The rising illiberalism and extremism espoused by the GOP means the Democrats' reliance on extraordinary candidates to win elections leaves our democracy to chance. The Democratic party must focus on its brand, its bench, and its values if we are to defend our democracy.

DEC 9, 2022

A MONTH LATER:

Strong Dem Candidates Defy History, But Hurt The Long-Term Prospects Of The Party

It's been a month since the 2022 US Midterm. By now we know Democrats not only beat back a Red Wave, but defied history. Dems gained a seat in the Senate and lost just 9 seats in the House. In the last 100 years, the President's party has done this well in a midterm election just [3 other times](#). Democratic operatives [have shifted](#) from expecting a competitive Democratic Presidential Primary to planning a Biden re-election campaign. [Team Biden](#) all but said "I told you so." And the Executive Director of the DCCC went on a [victory lap](#).

Can we pause for a moment? As campaign strategists, when we look at this, something just doesn't add up. How does a President with a [negative job approval](#) rating (44% - 55% approve - disapprove) carry his party to a decisive win? How does a President with nearly half of voters (47%) thinking his policies are harming the country (14 points higher than those thinking he is helping) lead his party to a history-defying victory?

Maybe he's just super popular on a personal level? Nope. Turns out his personal favorability rating is worse than his job rating (41% - 56% favorable - unfavorable).

Maybe his party has a stellar standing and overcame the President's tragic numbers on the back of its own brand and popularity? Ummm, not exactly. The Democratic Party also holds a negative favorability rating (44%-53%). More than half (51%) of voters think the party is too extreme. And by a 2:1 margin, voters prefer Republicans over Democrats on handling arguably the biggest issue of the election (inflation).

"Really strong candidates" is not a good strategy. We must ask ourselves: how much stronger of a night would Dems have had if they could leverage a strong party brand or strong party leadership?

So it would appear the Democrats defied history *despite* the party and President, not because of them. But how?

Extraordinarily. Strong. Candidates.

Raphael Warnock, Mark Kelly, John Fetterman, Maggie Hassan, Catherine Cortez Masto. As we've said, Democrats require great candidates to win elections. Democrats outperformed expectations because their candidates built brands independent of the deeply unpopular Party and President. They did not echo the President's final plea to voters to defend democracy.¹ Instead, they were laser focused on the issues that mattered in their races, inflation and abortion rights.

Democratic party strategists are patting themselves on the back for defending democracy, but they lost the House and arguably left a few Senate seats on the table. Instead of asking how they prevented a Red Wave, they should ask why they failed to achieve a historic Blue Wave. Dems had extremely high quality candidates. Trump's insertion into the election provided the gift of hand-picked, cringe-worthy candidates in key races. And in a moment when people still crave stability, Trump's brand of aggressive chaos served as a reminder of the risks of the modern GOP, over which he still maintains a strong grip.

"Really strong candidates" is not a good strategy. We must ask ourselves: how much stronger of a night would Dems have had if they could leverage a strong party brand or strong party leadership?

1. For the record, at the macro level, the President is right albeit late to the game. Our democracy is in danger. Norms are fraying, flaunted, or outright demolished. Political violence, while still rare, is increasingly common. Attempts to circumvent, undermine, or dismantle the laws that undergird our democracy are daily headlines. This is not a comfortable trajectory. We must act. But where the President was wrong is in thinking this would be a major last minute "call to arms" for small-d democrats of the nation to unite behind big-D Democrats as the protectors of our democracy. Pre-election [polling](#) showed that while people are concerned about the state of our democracy, there is no cross-cutting reason. Biden's "call to arms" did not break through.

1 THE CURRENT DEMOCRATIC STRATEGY IS NOT SUSTAINABLE.

Candidates matter. But relying almost exclusively on strong candidates to win elections on their own is constantly playing with fire. There are four reasons why this “strategy” is unreliable:

- **Dems benefitted from noxious Republican candidates.** Donald Trump refuses to exit the scene. Some of his most high profile candidates failed miserably. Herschel Walker, Dr. Oz, Sarah Palin. Mitch McConnell [recognized this](#). Speaking of playing with fire, Dems [even helped some of the extremists](#) in their primary bids, in order to face a more extreme candidate in the general election. While this worked out this cycle, it is a [dangerous strategy](#). Relying on extreme opponents is a crutch. What happens when your opponent is good?
- **Not every strong Dem candidate wins.** As much as we talk about Georgia and Pennsylvania, what about Wisconsin? Or North Carolina? Or Ohio even? If Dems spent as much time staring at their losses as they do at

their wins, they might start to draw the right lessons. Take Mandela Barnes in Wisconsin. He followed the playbook. He separated himself from the Party. He hammered Ron Johnson on abortion. He was a *good* candidate. But he lost by 1 point. 1 point! How much do you think the Dem brand or an unpopular President cost him? Probably more than that. Or Cheri Beasley in North Carolina. She lost by 3 points in a state Obama carried twice, and Trump only won by 1 point in 2020. And in Ohio, Tim Ryan lost to J.D. Vance by nearly 7 points. Being a good candidate wasn’t good enough.

- **Strong Dem candidates that do win often do so by razor thin margins.** Even the wins are hardly convincing. Sure, US politics is zero sum (you win, or you lose). But as strategists, we look at wins like Nevada, where Cortez Masto won by just 9,007 votes (0.9% of the electorate), Yadira Caraveo in Colorado who won by just 1,632 votes (0.7% of the electorate), and Katie Porter in Southern California (and one

of the best [Democratic fundraisers](#)) winning by 9,092 votes (3.4% of the electorate). With victories this thin, the idea that some might claim this as a huge Democratic win is alarming. Democrats were a few thousand votes here and there from getting destroyed. Sure, a win is a win. But let’s draw the right lessons.

- **“Events” and candidate missteps carry outsized weight.** John Fetterman had a stroke on the campaign trail. A stronger opponent (i.e., not a *literal puppy killer*) would have exploited the medical emergency to defeat Fetterman. Fetterman prevailed. But not every strong Dem candidate can withstand a major event or overcome a misstep. Take Elaine Luria in Virginia. She was part of the 2018 Democratic retaking of the House. She edged out a Republican incumbent by just 6,113 votes. She won reelection in 2020. In her closing ad of 2022, however, she says direct to camera “I’m not

The longer we ignore the problem—that the Democratic Party brand is “non-existent” at absolute best—the more likely we are to wind up a failed democracy.

your candidate” 4 times. Not to play armchair psychologist, but that doesn’t feel like the message you want to repeat. A misstep from an otherwise strong campaigner. She lost by around 10,000 votes. On the other hand, Herschel Walker managed 48.6% in the Georgia Senate run-off despite his [numerous](#) and [well-documented](#) shortcomings. He is buoyed by a strong brand and almost won against a good candidate.

Relying on strong candidates is terrible strategy. It jolts the party from election to election. Big picture, it offers no real plan to defeat extremists. If we truly believe our democracy is at risk,² then we may as well be playing dice with it. The longer we ignore the problem—that the Democratic Party brand is “non-existent” at *absolute best*—the more likely we are to wind up a failed democracy.

2. We do.

2 A STRONG PARTY BRAND IS NECESSARY FOR A LONG-TERM STRATEGY.

Yes, this is obvious. And no, this is not a novel idea. But someone in DC doesn't seem to get it. Or maybe a lot of someones.

A strong Democratic Party brand is a prerequisite to long-term success. Any real strategy from the Democrats will focus on this. A strong party brand provides three advantages:

- **Solid Foundation:** New Dem candidates begin with the attributes of the party. Right now, that means they start in a hole on the economy and public safety. They are "soft" on core American values like hard work and patriotism. Investing in the brand for the long-term means closing those gaps on important values and issues so candidates have a strong foundation to build from, rather than a hole to fill right out of the gate.
- **Offensive deployment:** With negative favorability ratings and half of Americans saying the Dem party is too extreme, Dems cannot use the party as an attack dog. They try of course. The DCCC attempts to provide air cover for candidates. Biden tried to control the narrative of the

campaign. And voters ignored them. A strong party that listens and engages, that voters trust, would carry the heavy loads for candidates, attacking on the right issues, in the right races (e.g., abortion rights!), and with effect.

- **Defensive bulwark:** The best utility of a strong party is the unbreakable foundation it provides. Republicans enjoy this. No matter the Republican candidate, Dems struggle attacking them on economic issues. Why? Because the Republican party brand is rock solid on handling the economy (despite [mountains of data](#) proving that the Republicans are *terrible* at running a free-market economy). The Republican brand acts as a shield. They root it in values (reward hard work, pull yourself up by your bootstraps, stop the freeloaders). Dems don't have this. Obviously, Dems do not have to compete on the same values, but they can create a brand that shields candidates from attacks rather than opens them up to more. What are those values? What is that brand? Who are Dems fighting for, anyway, and why do they fail to hammer this home?

3 LEADERSHIP CHANGE IS GREAT, BUT DEMS NEED TO BUILD AN ACTUAL POLITICAL PARTY.

Pelosi and other octogenarian Democratic Party leaders stepping down creates an opportunity for the Party. Leadership that better reflects Democratic voters and the party's future is important. Representation matters. Perspective matters. But changing the face alone is not strategic change. Hakeem Jeffries leading the House Dems is historic (he is the first Black party leader in Congress). Senate Dems added 50-year old Brian Schatz to leadership. But their selections highlight the very problem we've been talking about: there was no buildup, no investment in the next generation of leaders.

Dem leaders who've held office for decades should have proteges. There should be a well-honed bench ready to follow them (at least 2 generations deep, at this point). Instead, that bench is decidedly empty.

And yet, it's more than just a lack of investment in a bench of candidates. The weak brand and lack of a solid bench creates a paradox. Mark Kelly cannot be both the independent, Arizona-focused advocate and also a leader of

the Democratic Party. Raphael Warnock cannot be the Georgia Reverend, fighting for people regardless of party, and also a leader of the Democratic Party. If Democrats continue to require strong, independent candidates to win elections, those same would-be leaders cannot lead the party. To lead is to lose. They must remain independent.

What is our vision? Who are we fighting for? What are our values? These are the questions Dem strategists should focus on answering. And armed with answers, build that brand.

Investing in long-term party building is as much about building a strong bench as it is building a strong brand by advancing a strategy to serve people. Politics is about power. But to what end? We believe that "end" is about helping people. Ostensibly, so do Democrats. How do Dems show that? How do Dems own that brand?

- **Listening to people and being part of their communities.** The Democratic party often feels out of touch with its own voters. Some of this is [the issues we focus on](#). Some of it is [how we talk](#). More importantly, it requires actually being part of the community. Being there in times of need, helping people outside of the election cycle, aligning, advocating, and organizing with community groups to fix problems. Asking people to vote Dem should not be the only time voters hear from the Democratic party.
- **Reflecting the communities the party purports to represent.** A few weeks ago, we said Biden's speech on fighting for the Soul of the Nation was "written for college-educated Democrats, by college-educated Democrats". [Dems lost ground among working class voters in 2022](#). Again. And we are not talking about White working class voters. Dems went from around 48% support in the working class in 2018 and 2020 to just 43% in 2022. There was no change in White working class support. Instead, voters of color in the working class are shifting against Dems. As the party that self-ascribes diversity and fighting for working people, losing support among working class people of color is telling.

Staffing campaigns and offices with people from working class backgrounds ([heck, even candidates from the working class](#)) in diverse communities is incredibly important to building a party that credibly represents its target voters. This is not simply about having their faces around. Rather, it's about having their voices and perspectives. Without this change, we will continue to hemorrhage votes among these "core Democratic constituencies."

- **Fighting for a clear, consistent, core value set.** Dems struggle with values. This is remarkable because it is the most fundamental question a political party should be able to answer: who and what do you stand for? What are Dems for? Really, what are they for? Often, the Dem party simply becomes 'Not Republican'. That's enough for many of us, but it's not a brand. What happens when the Republican isn't as odious as Trump or Walker? Just take a look at the Democrats' "[Freedom](#)" messaging this cycle; these are direct reactions to Republican stances, not emblematic of a unique Democratic vision. What is our vision? Who are we fighting for? What are our values? These are the questions Dem strategists should focus on answering. And armed with answers, build that brand.

Dems beat expectations in 2022. They did it on the back of extraordinary candidates. But the more the Party requires candidates to win on their own, the further Dems stray from a coherent long-term strategy. The reality is, this Midterm could have been much better for Dems if the Party and leadership were assets. It is a mistake to think the brand is simply a problem to work around. It can be better. It must be better. Let's make it better. 🌍

Candidates matter. But relying exclusively on strong candidates to win elections on their own is playing with fire. A strong Party brand is necessary for a long-term strategy.

NOV 1, 2022

1 WEEK OUT:

Campaigning Against Extremists

We live in an era of increasing extremism. It is not unique. We have seen this movie before. Perhaps, as before, we underestimate the severity of the risk. We belittle the extremists as crazy. We ignore them as a sideshow. We write off their potentially extraordinary impact on our societies as unrealistic "in the modern era."

We underestimate the existential threat extremists pose to our way of life. The resulting tectonic shifts, whether the extremists rise to power or simply shake the foundations of our societal norms, have a lasting, deleterious effect.

As democratic parties, what do you do? It's one thing to run against and lose to another democratic party you disagree with. You give your concession speech. You oppose them in government, point out their failures, remind voters how you would do things differently, and why they would be better off with you in charge next time.

But what happens when your opponent's aim is the consolidation of power and the eventual refashioning of order in their image? What happens when your opponents will stop at nothing--neither norms nor laws nor police barricades--to achieve that power?

How do you confront this threat to our institutions and, potentially, to our democracy and way of life? How do you fight back against parties who don't play by the same rules?

How do you campaign against extremism?

Great minds have [written entire books](#) on this subject. We've got your attention for, what, 5 minutes?

Here goes nothing.

1 TAKE THE THREAT SERIOUSLY, BUT DON'T MAKE YOUR CAMPAIGN ABOUT THE THREAT.

"As always when it comes to stopping dictators, with every delay, the price goes up." We would do well to heed that admonition from Garry Kasparov. The overwhelming historical record tells us, the path of extremism does not usually stop at rhetoric. Yet taking extremism head-on, apart from feeling like the right thing to do, is often the wrong approach. There are three specific reasons for this:

- **The Battlefield Trap.** Extremism is mostly an 'issue' for the extremists. Republicans 'own' election denial. If Dems start talking about election denial, about the value of democracy, about norms they're violating, or even just using facts (like showing that the only *actual* fraud in the 2020 elections were a few [isolated events](#), mostly perpetrated by Republicans), Dems are fighting on the wrong battlefield. This is their terrain, not ours, it motivates their base, not ours. Sadly. And as we've said before, in the zero sum world of campaigns, every second spent on one issue is time not spent on another.

- **Base inflammation:** When we attack the extremist leaders, whether they [support an](#)

[attempted coup](#), or [make light of political violence](#), base supporters fight even harder to defend their leaders. Demagogues demand parasocial relationships. They demand fealty. Attacking the leader enrages their supporters. They become more animated, more involved, more likely to post, share, comment, vote, or advocate extremist behaviors.

- **Moderate validation:** Even having the debate benefits extremists by giving *validation* to their role as the 'outsider.' Most people are not as focused on politics as those of us writing or reading this article. Let's call these people moderates. If the status quo leaders attack the demagogue, it suggests to these moderates that "he may be on to something." This is particularly problematic where the status quo party or leaders are unpopular, viewed as the establishment, or have been around for decades (see: the Democratic Party's leadership).

Attacking extremism head-on doesn't work. Not dealing with it is not an option. So... now what?

2 FOCUS ON THE PEOPLE. IT'S ALWAYS ABOUT PEOPLE.

Ideals lose to the exigencies of life. About 8 weeks ago, President Joe Biden made a prime time national speech to all Americans: [“The Continued Battle for the Soul of the Nation”](#). [He was in Philadelphia](#), birthplace of America’s democracy.¹ Biden invoked the Constitution, the rule of law, the democratic ideals of free and fair elections. He asserted that MAGA Republicans are a threat to the very “foundations” of the country. Letting them win this year will take the country backwards.

That’s all true.

And high brow.

Democracy is esoteric. Free and fair elections is esoteric. Our country’s “foundations” is esoteric. The speech was written by college-educated Democrats for college-educated Democrats. People do not care about institutions. They care about their families’ safety, stability, opportunities, dignity, and health. They care about affording rent, buying

groceries, having a decent job they don’t hate. The better-off are looking to go out regularly, go on vacations, retire with a decent nest egg.

The threat to democracy is real. But to defeat that threat, to campaign successfully against extremists, we must make it real for people. We must connect back to the issues that matter, connect back to people’s lives.

Biden did it better in 2020. Biden attacked Trump’s extremism via Trump’s impacts on actual people. Trump cut social support for seniors and left them out to dry during the pandemic. [Seniors’ shifted against Trump](#). Trump disregarded science, misinformed people on how to keep your family safe, and increased instability in daily pandemic life. White suburban moms, their family’s chief caretaker, [shifted against Trump](#).

Battling extremism must be about helping people vs. harming people.

1. Sorry, Boston. #flyeaglesfly

Extremism hurts people. Directly. Daily. It takes away jobs. It takes away healthcare. It takes away opportunities. It puts loved ones in jeopardy. Battling extremism is a battle of [light vs. dark](#), as Biden put it. But, if that’s all it is, we will lose. Battling extremism must be about helping people vs. harming people.

Good campaigns get this. In Brazil, [Lula nailed this](#). While national Democrats and the national party are competing to see who can say ‘MAGA Republicans’ more often, disciplined campaigns like Mark Kelly in Arizona, Raphael Warnock in Georgia, and Mandela Barnes in Wisconsin are tightly focused on their message boxes. None mentioned MAGA Republicans. While they are worried about the threat to democracy, it is not a talking point. They’re focused on what a win for their opponents will mean for people: Kelly attacking Masters on [abortion](#), Warnock attacking Walker on [abortion and violence against women](#), and Barnes attacking Johnson on [abortion and cutting social supports for the elderly](#).

Sometimes, even that’s not enough. Sometimes, you also have to play by uncomfortable rules.

3 IF YOUR OPPONENT HAS FEWER CONSTRAINTS, YOU ARE ALREADY BEHIND.

Moral victories are the consolation prize of losers. Michelle Obama famously challenged Democrats, “When they go low, we go high.” That sounds lovely, but it’s terrible politics. Even her [retconning](#)² of what she meant is still wrong.

Politics is about one thing: power. If your opponent is willing to bend or break more rules than you are, they have the advantage. Long before Donald Trump, Karl Rove was the brains behind George W. Bush’s well-known comfort with “sleazy” campaigns. In Bush’s 2000 presidential campaign, for example, he famously [smeared war veteran John McCain](#) in the South Carolina primary. Rove made a career of being willing to say or do anything in order to win. Why? [Because it works](#).

Campaigns that want to win cannot shy away from this mentality. It is a fair question to ask what red lines exist. Certainly, we are not advocating for violence of any kind. That’s not a world

2. Yes, we also read Fox News. Like it or not, it’s extremely influential.

we want to live in (though, again, history has some unpleasant things to say about our current trajectory). But if we want to avoid living in that world, the good guys need to win. And in order to win, campaigns need to stop pretending the ethical high-road is the only way to win.

They need to be comfortable playing with fewer constraints. Certainly, this is a “bend the rules, don’t break them” suggestion. But by all means, bend them where you need to. And understand that perception is reality when it comes to politics. The truth is secondary.

Campaigning against extremism is extraordinarily difficult. Taking it head on often feels like the best response. But this can help it grow. Campaigns can take the teeth (and arguably the allure) away from extremist views and leaders by showing how it impacts people and offering our own story for how our views and leaders can make life a little better for people.

Throughout this series we share how we are thinking about the election in real time. We avoid the hyperventilating punditry available elsewhere, and we most certainly make no hard-set predictions. That is a mistake one tends to make only once.³ 🌍

3. That one time: stating in 2016, “Thank god the Republicans nominated Donald Trump, the ONLY person Hillary Clinton can beat.” So much for that.

OCT 21, 2022

3 WEEKS OUT:

Understanding who votes

Elections are about people. Understanding who votes is critical to winning. That doesn’t mean just knowing the numbers (which people will show up, what the demographic make-up will be, etc.). It means understanding them on a personal level, a *human* level. What do they care about? What are their fears, their hopes? What do they need and want for themselves, their kids, their parents?

As we’ve said, elections are an emotional exercise. Strong campaigns address issues that matter to people. They forge deep, meaningful connections with communities over time. They reflect the communities they represent. While clear, data-driven strategy is a key ingredient to winning, connecting with people is paramount.

But which people? Should campaigns care about everyone equally? Well, no.

Elections are about people.

But which people?

Should campaigns care about everyone equally?

Well, no.

1 “LIKELY VOTERS”: IDENTIFYING WHO WILL VOTE IS A GOOD FIRST STEP.

Over the last 10 years, the US set record LOW and record HIGH electoral participation rates. For our non-Americans readers, voting in the US is not compulsory, and registration is not automatic. (Elections are also on Tuesdays...it's a long story.) Indeed, up until very recently, only 50-60% of adults eligible to vote would cast a ballot in Presidential years. In midterm years (that is, non-presidential elections like this one in a few weeks), it is even lower. In the 2014 midterm, only about a third (36%) of eligible adults voted—the [lowest in 72 years](#). Just 4 years later, the 2018 midterms [set the record](#) for ballots cast in a non-presidential year. That record lasted only 2 years, as in 2020 a [record number of Americans](#) (158M) cast ballots. Say what you will about Donald Trump (and we will say plenty), he is undoubtedly a force for increased turnout (on both sides).

To conduct electoral research in the US, or any country without compulsory voting, we must reduce our aperture to only those people who will vote. Developing strategy from “all adults” is useless, if only half of them actually show up. Instead, campaigns

focus on “likely voters” (and further on their own target voters), lest they waste millions of dollars on ads to people who aren't even going to vote.

Identifying likely voters is tricky. There's plenty of data science behind it, and it's not always right. Some of the big missed projections in recent elections result, at least in part, from incorrect assumptions about who would vote. Still, an imperfect likely voter model is better than none at all. After all, the entire strategy and financial resources of the campaign rely on good targeting. Pollsters, strategists, paid and social media teams, TV analysts—we all need our likely voter models.

So what goes into a likely voter model? In the US we benefit from voter files—publicly available information about people's voting history (i.e., whether they voted in a given election or not)—which helps. Regardless, what information is useful, what questions can you ask in a survey that go into likely voter models? Without getting into the finer details, these models typically incorporate information from three buckets:

1: Past vote behavior: Past behavior is a good predictor of future behavior. Did you vote in each of the last 4 elections? Then you're probably voting in this one. Only vote in 1 of the last 4? Then we need more information about you.

2: Stated intention to vote: People are terrible at predicting their own future behavior. This includes voting. But, a combination of questions (Do you have a plan to vote? How likely are you to vote? How motivated are you? etc.) in surveys help us refine the model if you don't have information on their voting history, or to account for changing habits.

3: Non-voting behaviors and characteristics: Educational attainment, income, race, geography, age, how often you attend religious services (“religiosity”), how close you feel to a political party, news consumption, whether your friends or family vote—each of these are, to one degree or another, correlated to or associated with a likelihood of voting and are, thus, potential inputs for likely voter models.

Notably, likely voter models vary year to year. And state to state. And within each state year to year. They vary based on how competitive local elections are, who sits in the Oval Office, or if Mercury is in retrograde 4 weeks before the election.¹

Electoral participation is very high in states like Colorado, Oregon, and Washington where all registered voters are sent ballots via mail ahead of the election. It is also high in Minnesota where civic engagement is a state pastime. It is consistently low in states like New Mexico, West Virginia, and Indiana. And then there are states with laws and policies that actively attempt to prevent people from voting, like Texas, North Carolina, and Georgia.²

Different demographics also vote at different rates. Whites, college educated, older, higher income, and Republicans are more likely to vote than other groups. Regardless of the year or the election context. This poses obvious and consistent problems for Democrats for whom minorities and young people make up disproportionately large shares of the electorate.

1. OK, that last one is bullshit, though a certain unnamed presidential candidate from a certain unnamed country once said in a private strategy meeting with one ClearPath partner in attendance that his “hat” was worth 10,000 votes, so there are a lot of strange beliefs out there.

2. The national [Voting Rights Act of 1965](#) was passed to stop racial discrimination in elections, but has been [systematically gutted](#) by the Supreme Court. Yay, democracy!

On the other hand, Republican strategists (mostly rich, white, arch-capitalists) in the late 70s and 80s [made an unholy alliance](#), choosing to invest in white evangelical Protestants (born again Christians). They're still collecting dividends. White born again Christians voted for Reagan by [50 points](#), by [40 points for Bush](#), and by [60 points for Trump](#). In addition to providing these extreme margins, white born again Christians punch above their weight at the ballot box—they make up just [14%](#) of the total population but account for [28%](#) of the electorate!

Republicans took the culture wars mainstream because they understand politics is about winning and about power. And they can do math. Republicans actively choose to politicize white evangelicals, and they consistently fight for evangelical Christian values when in office because the GOP knows that as long as they have this fervent bloc of supporters in their corner, their grip on power is hard to detach.

Creating your likely voter model and knowing the “math” of the electorate is critical to allocating resources and figuring out a campaign’s path to victory.

But models can fail.

2 MODELS ARE NOT MYSTERIES. THEY ARE ASSUMPTIONS. QUALITY, REGULAR RESEARCH TESTS AND UPDATES THOSE ASSUMPTIONS.

In 2016, the Hillary Clinton campaign [did not conduct state level polling](#) in Wisconsin, Michigan or Pennsylvania for the last three weeks of the campaign. Instead, they relied on voter analytics and modeling—big data that could “predict” voting behavior. It didn’t. The three “Blue Wall” states [fell for the first time](#) in 24 years.

Models are algorithms. And as any Millennial YouTuber or Gen Z TikToker can tell you, algorithms have inputs. They’re based on assumptions. Human assumptions. Human inputs. A model is only as good as its raw data. A model meant to predict human behavior requires human behavior as inputs.

As we’ve said, dynamic campaigns build strong feedback loops with voters. Research is a major piece of that. Quality surveys are prerequisites to establishing the model. But, regular research is necessary to update the

model to account for changes in behavior, or resulting from events or other campaign realities.

The 2016 election is not the only recent example of modeling short-comings. In 2018, Democratic enthusiasm in primary elections dwarfed initial likely voter models. Campaigns updated LV models multiple times in 2018 to account for this Blue Wave, and later also the blowback effect of high Republican turnout to *defend* Trump. In 2020, massive spikes in turnout for both Republicans and Democrats were difficult to capture and varied state by state (e.g., in Montana the LV model, already predicting the highest turnout ever, undershot the actual result by an additional 10%!—sadly, all of it Republican).

Models also tend to break when unprecedented events happen (COVID, lockdowns, deep recessions, massive changes to election laws, etc.). These have difficult-to-predict impacts on elections and electorates, and therefore on likely voter models.

At the end of the day, a model is a simplification. Smart campaigns know

they are imperfect, but directionally useful. Other campaigns treat them like a palantír from the *Lord of the Rings*, able to show you the real truth. But to continue the metaphor, the palantírs were unreliable guides, often showing a “selective truth.”³ Campaigns that over-rotate to blind faith in their models are at great risk of disappointment.

Even more important than not treating your likely voter model as a sacred cow is understanding that it only helps us answer who votes. The model alone does not tell us who these people *are*.

Models are algorithms. Algorithms have inputs. They’re based on assumptions. Human assumptions. Human inputs. A model is only as good as its raw data. A model meant to predict human behavior requires human behavior as inputs.

3. Shout out to all our fellow nerds.

3 TURNOUT IS NOT STRATEGY. WE BUILD SMART STRATEGIES ON UNDERSTANDING THE PEOPLE.

In Democratic politics, 'Hispanic and Black voters are turnout audiences' is a common refrain.

We hate this.

What that says is, we aren't treating them as people. We aren't listening to or respecting what they want or why they vote. It means 'we don't need to spend money persuading them to vote for us, we just need to turn them out'. It is built on math, not values. It is built on a sense of entitlement. It is built on... whatever the opposite of empathy is.⁴

Democratic strategists believe Black and Hispanic voters support Democrats at such high rates that simply getting them to the ballot box is all the campaign needs to do. Then they can use campaign resources on ads fighting over white voters who vacillate between D and R.

At best, this type of thinking reduces communities to a least common denominator. It oversimplifies and is dangerously short-sighted. Rather than party-building, community engagement,

or even just being present all year round, Democrats show up for these audiences in September and October just in time to ask them to vote. Then election day hits, and Dems scurry back to DC.

We are far from the first people to level this criticism. Black organizers and elected officials consistently ask the Democratic party to invest and campaign in Black communities ([here](#) it is after 2016; here it is again [in 2020](#)). These requests have not received an adequate response. And may be seeing the impact of this indifference. While Black women consistently vote for Democrats at 90+%, Black men have been [shifting away](#) from the party since Obama's first term.

As bad as Democratic flippancy has been with the Black community, it's arguably worse with Hispanics.

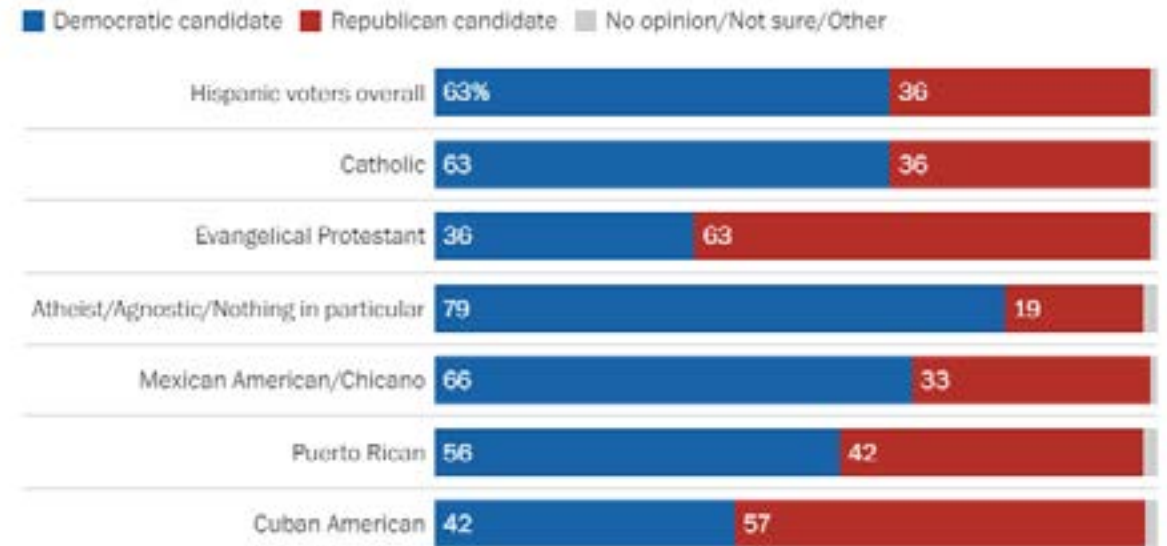
Hispanics are 2022's quintessential demographic example of the Democratic party refusing to focus on people. First, the Democratic Party wrongly lumps "Hispanics" together as a monolithic bloc.

But Hispanics in Florida are different from Hispanics in Arizona, who are different from Hispanics in New York, or Colorado, or Texas. Mexicans in New Mexico are different from Venezuelans in Florida. Cubans are different from Salvadorans. Catholic Hispanics are different from Protestant Hispanics. Young Hispanics are different from older Hispanics.

Misunderstanding the Hispanic electorate—their needs, their values, their community, and even who constitutes this diverse bloc—is the result of Democrats defining Hispanics by their ethnicity, rather than understanding them as people.

Vote choice among key Hispanic demographic groups

Q: If the election for Congress in your district were held today, for whom would you vote? Which candidate would you lean toward?



Source: Sept. 22-Oct. 3, 2022, Washington Post-Ipsos poll of 1,088 registered Hispanic voters with an error margin of +/- 4 percentage points. Error margins larger among subgroups.

EMILY GUSKIN / THE WASHINGTON POST

4. Indifference, apathy, disdain. We know; this just felt more dramatic.

Second, up until very recently ([last year](#) in fact), the Democratic Party would default to talking to Hispanics *only about immigration* ([here](#) they are in the 2008 cycle, and Clinton [in 2016](#), and [Biden in 2020](#)) as if by virtue of their heritage, this is the only thing that could matter to them. The reality is, Hispanics [prioritize](#) the economy, healthcare, and crime higher than immigration. Jobs, health, and safety. Fundamental needs. Maslow's hierarchy. While Biden started to layer in economic and health in 2020, immigration was always, and infuriatingly, first.

Turnout is not strategy. Campaigns are about people. Elections are about connecting with the right people in an authentic and relevant way. Building long-term capacity and bonds with people will win elections.

Third, Democrats ironically don't even get immigration right with Hispanic voters, especially in border states. In Texas, Hispanic voters say Republican Governor Greg Abbott has the better immigration policy by a [9 point margin](#) over

Democratic candidate Beto O'Rourke. A sizable minority (30-40%) of Hispanics [support increasing border security](#) and making it harder for [immigrants to overstay their visas](#). In focus groups, the nuance is starker—older Hispanic immigrants who migrated legally have an "if I did it the 'right way', then others should, too" mentality.

Fourth, there is a tendency, particularly among the progressive wing of the Democratic party, to prioritize equity, even when it's not the priority of the targeted "beneficiary." For example, the recent rise of the term "LatinX" as a gender-neutral, pan-ethnic way to describe Hispanic people is a term that hardly any Hispanic person uses ([only 3%, according to Pew](#)). Its use arguably does more harm than good by [signaling that Dems don't understand](#) (or even try to understand) the people they purport to represent.

Misunderstanding the Hispanic electorate—their needs, their values, their community, and even who constitutes this diverse bloc—is the result of Democrats defining Hispanics by their ethnicity, rather than understanding them as people.

Republicans get it. They take a tougher stance on immigration and the border, but lead with economic opportunity messaging for Hispanics. No surprise, [Trump made gains](#) with Hispanic voters nationally. A [record number](#) of Republican Latinas are running for Congress. Since a 2012 low-point, Republicans have strategically invested in Hispanic outreach, recruitment, and capacity building. And it's working.

In the final weeks of the cycle, Democrats are [outspending Republicans](#) on Spanish-language ads 3:1. And they are prioritizing messaging on jobs, the economy, and abortion—all top issues

among Hispanic voters. Though one final push before the election likely is not enough to make up for more than a decade of bad messaging reliant on bad assumptions, at least it's a start.

Turnout is not strategy. Campaigns are about people. Elections are about connecting with the right people in an authentic and relevant way. Building long-term capacity and bonds with *people* will win elections. It requires actually understanding them, listening to them talk about their needs, helping to fulfill them, and actively representing them. And not waiting until September of an election year to do so. 🌍

OCT 13, 2022

4 WEEKS OUT:

How good candidates weaponize 'values'

Good candidates set the terms of the election. Great candidates drill their campaign pillars into people's values. Not everyone's values, necessarily—just enough to achieve mathematical victory. Put another way, successful candidates weaponize values to achieve power. Issues, agenda, manifestos... these are all secondary. They're the proof points you use to add substance and detail; they are weight behind the shaft.

We've repeatedly said we are in an economic moment. Republicans would do well to focus on the economy—as some have. But, early on in the cycle they (re)opened another lane of attack: crime. Why?

In a word: **values**.

Elections are an emotional exercise. People make decisions based on how they feel more than what they think. This is the foundation for creating the choice in an election.

1 EVERY ELECTION IS A VALUES ELECTION

Elections are an emotional exercise. People make decisions based on how they feel more than what they think. This is the foundation for creating the choice in an election.

Sometimes, creating this choice is about an actual choice between two competing values: my way vs some other way (e.g., supporting a specific group of people vs helping everyone equally).

Sometimes, it's simply about making sure your people know you share their values and are fighting for them (e.g., I am the candidate who will fight for your right to party).

And sometimes, it's about creating fear, a feeling of threat (false or legitimate) that your values are under attack from some enemy (again, false or legitimate).

Republicans are very good at running values campaigns, and often their campaigns take that [last approach](#). They generate a fear of "other", a viscerally felt threat to your values, and a sense of victimhood. This is all happening to you by a force—usually an identifiable group of people, an enemy—with malicious intent.

Sometimes campaigns signal these values choices implicitly ([Romney at the NAACP in 2012](#)). Sometimes, it's much more explicit ([Trump's 2016 announcement speech](#)).

Despite most people saying they will 'vote for the better *candidate*', the vast majority of people rely on heuristics for which candidate's values align with their own. In the U.S., that manifests itself as a single letter after an individual candidate's name: R or D. That's why 90-95% of Democrats vote for Democratic candidates, and 90-95% of Republicans vote for Republican candidates.

Of course, values are not immutable. They change over time and often non-linearly. Campaigns cannot expect the

same values choice to work forever. For example, gay marriage in the U.S. was sufficiently controversial even 15 years ago that Barack Obama [could not support it](#). After slow progress in individual states, a major win at the Supreme Court was the catalyst leading to rapid [change](#) in public opinion.

But good campaigns don't wait for change. That's a shitty strategy. Rather, they seek out the values choices they can use to drive voters to the polls. It doesn't even have to be something campaigns create on their own. Odds are it won't be. But it does have to create a choice. Choose me—the person fighting for your values. Choose me—the other person is a threat to your way of life.

Good campaigns seek out the values choices they can use to drive voters to the polls. Choose me—the person fighting for your values. Choose me—the other person is a threat to your way of life.

2 REPUBLICANS USE VALUES TO CREATE AND EXPLOIT DIVISIONS

Republicans leverage issues and turn them into value debates. Their recent messaging on crime is a case of nefarious and obvious “us vs them” fear-mongering. In AZ, Blake Masters directly blames [Black people](#) for gun violence. In PA, Dr. Oz uses images of Black people behind bars to [attack](#) John Fetterman for being soft on crime. Republicans in WI tie Mandela Barnes (who would be the state's first Black Senator) to [‘radical’](#) groups that want to defund the police. And straight from the heart of Dixie, Republican U.S. Senator Tommy Tuberville from Alabama explicitly links [reparations](#) for Black people with crime.

Republicans today lead with values, specifically leveraging “us vs. them” and fear. Crime isn't about safety stats, it's about “outsiders endangering my community.” Immigration isn't about our country's demography, it's about “others” ([illegals](#)) changing who we are as a country. Abortion and gay marriage isn't about rights, it's an attack on traditional families.

The economy isn't even about anything economic, it's about government overreach. “Too much” stimulus is the current attack, but when it is appropriate, it will be about “not enough” stimulus. **Consistency and intellectual honesty are not prerequisites for the values debate.** Motivated reasoning rolls over cognitive dissonance any day of the week. Facts can't overcome values.

Republicans use “otherism” to turn crime (indeed most issues) into a not so subtle discussion on who is American, who deserves to be a citizen, who deserves opportunity, and who deserves to be a full member of society. In weaponizing issues, Republicans often evoke a sense of victimhood—this was ours, and those others are threatening it. This is especially easy with crime.

The play here is two-fold:

- First, they gin up a Republican base that believes [“America is in danger of losing its culture and identity.”](#)
- Second, by focusing on crime, Republicans can pick off moderate voters who are not being race-baited, but still have concerns about rising crime in their community. Republicans warp safety into race, but are still talking about safety.

Moderate voters will hold their nose and vote GOP if they think they will do a better job than Democrats at keeping their communities safe.

Interestingly, despite the racial backdrop of this issue coming from Republicans, this is not just about winning moderate and conservative whites. The people most impacted by crime are poor Black people, poor Hispanic people, poor Asian people, poor Native American people and also poor white people. [Seven in ten](#) Hispanic voters say violent crime is a ‘very important’ issue in their community (second only to the economy, and tied with healthcare).

By not talking about crime at all, Democrats cede the entire battlefield to Republicans. They effectively take no part in any discussion of crime with Republicans and allow Republicans to occupy both the racist, anti-Black, anti-immigrant dystopian view of crime, and the more moderate ‘we need to keep our communities safe’ lane. **Ceding the issue cedes the value.** While some individual Democratic candidates are trying (see [Catherine Cortez Masto in NV](#)), few make it central to their campaign. The party itself does not have a clear plan to reduce crime, let alone a way of talking about crime that connects back to core values.

3 DEMOCRATS STRUGGLE WITH SHARED VALUES

The Democratic party has long had the moniker of a “big tent” party. Arguably the only thing that holds the party together is ‘not Republican’. To be fair, the Republican party is “big tent” too (e.g., Christian conservatives, working class whites, business elites).

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Joe Manchin are miles apart on values and issues. In a country with more than a 2-party system, they would almost certainly not be in the same political party. Even on what seems like a basic issue—abortion—not all Democrats are aligned. Conservative Black and Hispanic voters who make up a very large portion of the Democratic party are at odds with the white, generally coastal, highly educated, urban voters who make up the other major bloc.

The real problem with the Democratic party, however, is the leadership is dramatically out of synch with its purported electorate. The three party leaders--Biden, Pelosi, and Schumer—could all legally drink alcohol at Woodstock. In 1969. They are also all white. In short, their experiences are

vastly different from the experiences of the people they represent. Whether or not they are empathetic or good people is irrelevant. The leadership may make noises to the effect of representing the party, but they are far too detached from the disparate groups that make up the Democratic base to make a credible argument that they “get it.”

The intra-party differences and lack of truly representative leadership boil over virtually every cycle. In 2020, [moderates accused progressives](#) of adopting “Defund the Police” messaging pushing away moderate Democratic voters. In 2018, [“not the party of Trump”](#) was not even enough to keep the party together. Without a cohesive narrative of America’s history, or future, Democrats struggle to build on and use core values.

This year some Democrats are [trying to cast](#) their fight as a fight for [“freedom” \(#Murica\)](#). The goal may be right, but the reality is Democrats have a massive deficit on freedom. During the last 2.5 years, Republicans (always playing the long game) were attacking Democrats for restricting personal freedom during

the pandemic. Dems did not run on freedom in 2020, 2018 or 2016. They didn’t run on it with Obama, Kerry, Gore or Bill Clinton. [Few voters](#) naturally equate the Democratic Party with freedom or prosperity, no matter what history tells us about Lyndon Johnson or Franklin Roosevelt.



Dems do best when they are focused on helping people. Our health, our job security, our dignity, our safety, our children, our future. Voters already think Democrats do a better job representing regular people. They already think Republicans put corporate interests ahead of people. By packaging their core message in freedom, Dems lose their focus on people. 🇺🇸

We cannot simply link issues to values with broad strokes. It must be specific and relevant to *people*.

Democracy isn't about protecting freedom. It's about people. Dems' focus on the attack on the Capitol has been about an attack on democracy. Yes, that is true. But, that cannot be the story. **“Protecting democracy” is esoteric. Defending your voice, your vote, your government is more tangible.**

Protecting the environment is not about ecosystems, animals, or the planet. It's about protecting our health and our children's future.

Helping people lead better lives is not about living in a better society. It's about helping people pay their bills. It's about helping people have stability and predictability.

OCT 6, 2022

5 WEEKS OUT:

The Issue Battlefield(s)

Democrats have some great candidates this cycle. And candidates Even the best candidates and campaigns lose if they misread the moment. Dynamic campaigns listen to their voters. They understand the mood and emotion of the moment, how to be relevant, and how to adapt when necessary.

Previous articles in this series laid out the 'players' in this election—why Democrats have unusually strong candidates (actually a sign of the party's weakness) and how bad Republican candidates can snatch defeat from the jaws of victory (but may still win, due to a strong brand and hyper-partisanship). Over these next two weeks, we will discuss how these good and bad candidates show they are relevant—what issues they highlight, and what values they fight for—as they seek to define the narrative and terms of the election.

Strategy is a series of choices. You can't do all the things, and you can't be everything to everyone. Campaigns must make choices, trade-offs. An ad about the economy is not about education. An attack ad on crime is not a positive ad on your vision.

Good campaigns make smart choices. They use research to drive these choices; to identify the voters they need to win; to listen to those voters and understand the "moment;" and to act by signaling to these voters, with the right combination of issues and values, that they (the candidate) are relevant to you (the voter).

1 IT'S THE ECONOMY, STUPID. AGAIN. THAT'S GOOD FOR REPUBLICANS

We are in an economic "moment." The macro story is obvious: inflation in the US is the highest in decades; millions of people are quitting their jobs every month, and millions more are getting hired; supply chains face extreme stress or are outright broken.

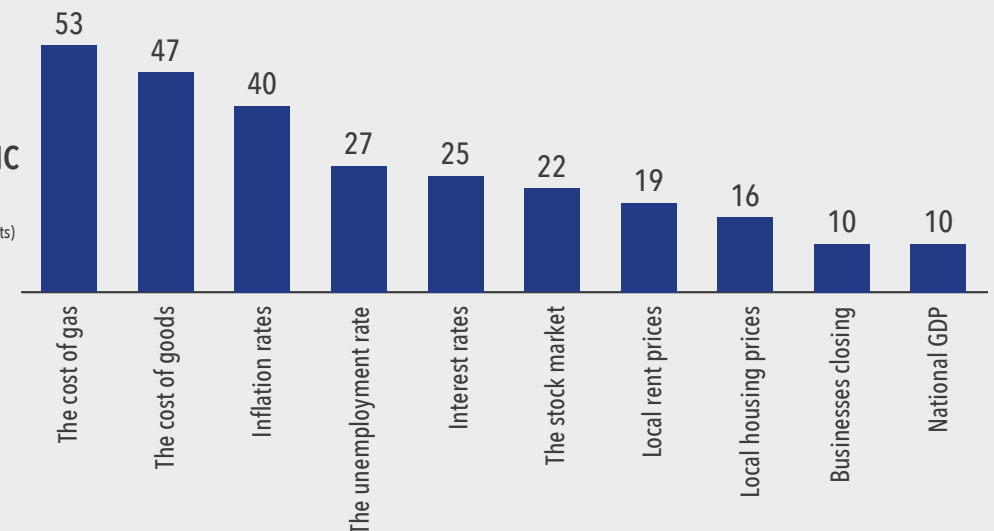
Voters feel it, too. In a survey we conducted this summer¹ to assess the mood and the moment in the US, half of adults said the economy was their number one concern (more than double any other issue). Four in ten Americans said they are not earning enough to meet

their basic needs or are just getting by. This is not just "a rough patch." This is a deeply and personally felt economic moment. **It is about cost of living—specifically gas prices and cost of basic goods—not the stock market or GDP.**

What makes the moment more acute is its unpredictability. Disruption is the norm. We've just endured 2 years of pandemic, and now the economy is wildly unsettled, with no clarity on when things will improve. People feel uncertain, anxious, wary. There is an intense need for stability.

MOST IMPORTANT INDICATORS OF ECONOMIC RECOVERY

(July 2022 National Adults)



1. We conducted an online nationally representative poll of 820 U.S. adults (18+) July 27-August 8.

This is the moment campaigns must meet. **But moments do not offer equal opportunity to everyone.** We've illustrated previously Republicans' advantage on the economy. Whether Republicans deserve that advantage (hint: actual economic data under Republican presidents suggests an emphatic "no") is irrelevant. Politics is about perception, not reality. Indeed, perception is reality.

One might ask, "But isn't every election about the economy?" Actually, no. For example, despite overnight pundits talking about the plight of the American working class in 2016, [study](#) after [study](#) shows the 2016 election was about more deeply-seated factors, including racism, sexism, and just bad candidates.

Still, most elections are arguably about the economy, in whole or in part. And time and time again, Democrats fail to close the gap with Republicans on this issue. [Here](#) are Democrats attributing their 2014 blowout to the lack of an economic message. And here again, their [attempt](#) in 2004.

Republicans will continue to press their advantage. That's why [Ron Johnson](#) in WI, [Blake Masters](#) in AZ, and [Adam Laxalt](#) in NV focus on "struggling families" and "the wrong direction" (though Johnson's focus on struggling [Earthling](#) families is a reach).

2 PARTIES BUILD ISSUE ADVANTAGES OVER TIME, BUT THEY ARE NOT IMMUTABLE

How voters perceive a party on a particular issue is part of their brand. It is built on trust, and sometimes facts. **If a voter trusts you are good on an issue, you get two major benefits: a) your message on that issue is picked up easily, and b) voters resist your opponents' attacks on it.** (Of course, this isn't always true, and a true political masterstroke is when you can dislodge your opponent from their position of strength.)

[Republicans beat Democrats on the economy](#), including creating jobs, fighting inflation, and supporting businesses. The irony notwithstanding, this election is favorable terrain for them as long as it remains about the economy. Republicans also beat Democrats on crime. (This is important, as we will discuss below.) For their part, Democrats 'win' on healthcare, abortion rights, and climate change.

These issue advantages are generally stable over time. Partly, this is

inertia. Partly, this is hyper-partisanship and heuristics, with each party's base assuming their side is "right" and unwilling to accept the other party having a "better" position on anything.

There are some notable exceptions. For example, Democrats traditionally have a strong advantage on education, above their vote share. Republicans have attempted to make inroads here, but have never succeeded enough to displace Dems. However, in 2021 Republicans learned to apply their broader playbook to education: they [manufactured a crisis around "Critical Race Theory"](#) to disassociate education from actual the actual issue of education and instead fight the issue along culture war lines. These attacks [erased](#) Democrats' advantage on education within a year.

Republicans do this because they understand elections are fundamentally about values (we will discuss this more in next week's issue). Though less adept at this political maneuver, Democrats are not wholly inept. Under Trump, Democrats cut deeply into Republicans' historical advantage on immigration by ringing the alarm on Trump's [inhumane family separation](#) policies. Despite supporting strict immigration laws, Americans still believe in

doing things humanely. Forcibly separating children from their parents crossed a line.

Health care has also flipped back and forth—traditionally a bastion of Democratic strength, Republicans undermined this in 2010 with claims of "death panels" and people "losing their chosen doctor" as a result of Obamacare. Ultimately, Republicans went too far, and having unsuccessfully attempted to repeal Obamacare 70 times, when they finally held power in 2018, they failed to replace it with anything. Because they had no plan. Health care swung violently back to the Dems—literally [half of Democratic ads](#) that year were on health care—and the [issue](#) was a major contributor to the Blue Wave in 2018.

Today, we are in an economic moment. On the surface, that favors Republicans. But the election is not a slam dunk for them. As we argued previously, candidates will play a major role in this election. Further, issue advantages and who you trust on an issue can change. Just as John McCain [lost the Republican advantage](#) on the economy in 2008, so too can Republican candidates lose this advantage in 2022. And then, of course, we come back to "events." Things happen. What matters can change. Elections fluctuate.

3 GREAT CANDIDATES LEAD DYNAMIC CAMPAIGNS THAT PROACTIVELY LISTEN AND LEARN.

Economies fluctuate. Sometimes very quickly. Gas prices—the number one economic indicator for regular people—have dropped for 3 months straight. Of course, the apparent sabotage of Nord Stream, the just-announced OPEC production cuts, and the natural increase in demand in Europe for energy during the winter all could reverse this trend quickly.

Republicans know this election can't and shouldn't just focus on who would do a better job on the economy. There must be more, not only in case the economic terrain softens for them, but also because they have learned an important lesson over the decades—cultural, values-driven messages carry more weight.

While Republicans have led with economic attacks, they have separately pushed a strong secondary message: crime. Adam Laxalt's [next ad](#) after

introducing himself and showcasing a struggling economy highlighted his time as district attorney, protecting people from assault, drugs, and trafficking. Marco Rubio in Florida [immediately went on the offensive](#) on crime, attacking Democratic candidate Val Demings—a former Orlando Chief of Police—for “turning her back on law enforcement.” In border state Arizona, “crime” as an issue [manifests as immigration](#).

Republicans did not land on crime by happenstance. They lean [further](#) and [further](#) into the crime narrative based on both recent and historic advantage. In 2020, Republicans successfully weaponized left wing activist calls to ‘Defund the Police’ in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Historically, Republicans have played the ‘tough on crime’ message going back decades. Some of our readers will remember Michael Dukakis and [Willie Horton \(1988\)](#). This line of attack works on Democrats, who typically rebuff these attacks with academic ripostes instead of an equally effective visceral narrative.

‘Tough on Crime’ is an integral part of the Republican brand. It is a safe space for them and an easy way to draw cultural lines in the sand. They call upon it whenever needed.

Democrats are not as intentional.

As we’ve said, Dems are capitalizing on the Supreme Court’s elimination of national abortion protections. Polling shows abortion rights are a leading driver of support for Democratic candidates. This is good news for them in 2022. But, what does it mean in 2024? If Democrats still control DC and do not enact abortion protections, what is the point of voting for them? If they control DC and do enact protection, is “vote for me to stop a national abortion ban” still a viable strategy? Unless Democrats can elevate this into a strategy, this has echoes of Republicans’ attacks on Obamacare in 2008.

That comparison, however, is not fully fair. Republicans were united, supposedly, against Obamacare. Democrats, on the other hand, have never had a united stance on abortion. Partly, this

Democrats are not as intentional.

is demographic and cultural. Black and Hispanic voters are a major constituency within the Democratic electorate. Yet they are much more socially conservative (especially older Black and Hispanic voters) than their white, upper-income, coastal Democratic counterparts. In order to win or hold seats, the Democratic Party supported an [anti-abortion Democratic incumbent](#) against a pro-choice primary challenger in both 2018 and 2020. Some party leaders thought pro-life Dems would be [how they win](#) back Congress. Biden (vigorously) supported the Hyde Amendment, restricting federal funds for abortions [until he announced](#) his run for the Presidency in 2019. He then [pledged](#) to make *Roe v Wade* law of the land...and did not deliver.

Focusing on abortion post *Roe v Wade* when Democratic voters are demanding action makes tactical sense. Democrats hold a big advantage on the issue.

The more the election becomes about abortion, the better Democrats' chances. But tactics are not strategy. What's missing is how Democrats convert this to something deeper, a cultural divide this speaks to, between what Republicans want for you, the voter, and what

Democrats want. What does it mean when Republicans seek to ban abortion under all circumstances? If Democrats only allow a ban on abortion to be about abortion, they are failing to take advantage of an historic opportunity (and failing to fully fight back). 🌱

SEPT 29, 2022

6 WEEKS OUT:

Could the Dems win this thing?

Democrats have some great candidates this cycle. And candidates matter. As we argued last week, bad candidates lose winnable elections. The reverse is also true. Great candidates win elections that a generic candidate wouldn't.

Raphael Warnock, Maggie Hassan, Mark Kelly, Mandela Barnes, John Fetterman... these are all great candidates. And they need to be because Democrats do not have a strong brand to rely on. Without a strong national brand focused on issues that drive elections, **Democrats need strong candidates to win.**

But, that means these candidates are on islands and only have a narrow path to victory. Every single race matters. Mistakes cost more. One [scandal](#), one wrong [policy step](#), one [surprise event](#), and they might sink. And there is no lifeboat party brand for them to cling to.

Why is the Democratic brand so weak? And what makes these candidates so great?

Democrats have some great candidates this cycle. And candidates matter. Great candidates win elections that a generic candidate wouldn't.

1 THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY BRAND IS WEAK. HOW DID IT COME TO THIS?

In this election as in most recent elections, Dems are saddled with a lackluster brand. How did we get here? Past is prologue, and you could draw a line all the way back through LBJ and beyond, if you wanted to, but just look at recent history for your answer. Barack Obama was an extremely popular Democratic president from 2009-2017. But he didn't invest in party building. He was a dream candidate, but not a party builder—ironic considering his background in organizing. Dems, too, failed to translate Obama's successes into party successes.

This vacuum of self-identity has been eagerly and successfully filled by Republicans—masters of branding. Republicans have been branding Democrats since well before the Obama days (e.g., anti-military, party of welfare, Hollywood liberals), a practice which has continued right up through the Trump years (e.g., anti-police, socialists, ultra-woke social justice warriors).

Which brings us back to the present. The Democratic party is notoriously bad at talking about their accomplishments.

They cannot create a cohesive vision of the future for voters to buy into. As a result, the brand is weak on the economy, on job creation, *on many of the issues that voters care about*. Dems consistently [poll below](#) Reps on each of these issues. Without strong brand fundamentals, few people see themselves in the Democratic party, and party leadership is out of favor, seeing extremely poor ratings. The national party has become a weapon the GOP uses *against* Dem candidates, not an asset Dems can rely on.

But the real situation is worse than just a “weak brand.” Voters know what the Democratic brand isn't: it's not a brand of fighters, or a brand of doers. It's not a brand for “fixing the economy”, even though that's usually what elected Dems have to do after the GOP enacts massive tax cuts. It's not a brand for bringing a calm, steady hand during a storm. And with its 3 party leaders (Biden, Pelosi, and Schumer) having a combined 125 years in national politics (and 232 years of age) amongst them, we are unlikely to see any changes to the Dem brand from within in the near term.

2 WINNING DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES ARE FORCED TO BE GREAT. THEY ARE FORCED TO BUILD AN INDEPENDENT BRAND.

In the 2018 midterms, the first after Trump's election, many Dems in so-called Purple or even Red states needed to acknowledge they would work with Trump as an ear-opener to begin their message to voters. Why? Because the Dem brand was so weak or even toxic that a good Dem candidate needed this separation to get a fair hearing.

Through their actions, words, and visuals, great candidates leave no ambiguity about who they are fighting for.

And we're seeing even more examples of this today: Mark Kelly is running on 'Arizona Independence'. If he runs as just another Democrat, he will lose. But, if he is '[Mark Kelly, take-action astronaut, independent Senator](#),' that's different. We see the same thing with [Raphael Warnock](#), who has been hyper-focused on running “for the people of Georgia” and who holds a 5 point lead over his opponent. John Fetterman continues

to make himself [the candidate for the working class](#), even though the Democratic Party [lacks widespread working class support](#).

We're not saying association with the Dem label is a death sentence. But without a strong brand, candidates—especially those in swing states—have to be more than just a Dem.

So what makes a great candidate?

Last week, we talked about **authenticity**. Fetterman [wears a hoodie](#) and is a relatable, atypical politician because that is who he is. We also talked about message discipline. Hassan literally hasn't stopped [talking about abortion since June](#).

Great candidates can also answer that most fundamental of political questions: **Who are you fighting for?** There is only one correct answer: people. Through their actions, words, and visuals, great candidates leave no ambiguity about who they are fighting for.

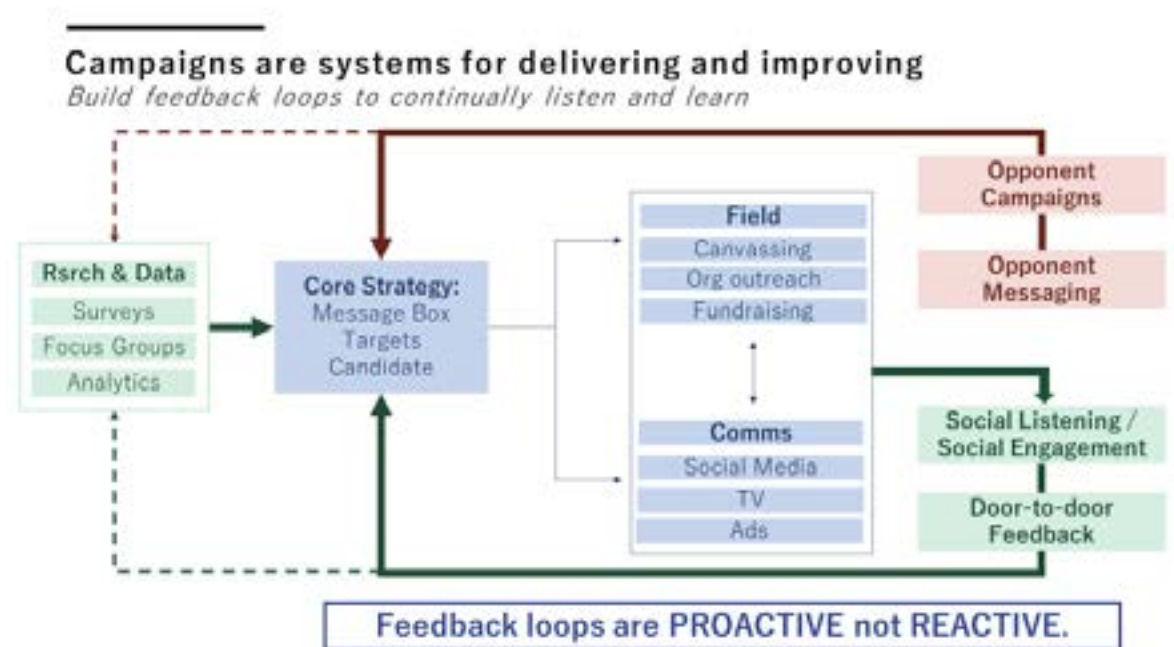
3 GREAT CANDIDATES LEAD DYNAMIC CAMPAIGNS THAT PROACTIVELY LISTEN AND LEARN.

On-message authentic candidates who have clear motivation are necessary. But like any good campaign, they must listen and adapt. In AZ, Kelly ran two years ago as the independent advocate for the state. This is the brand he has built and where he started his campaign this year. But in the context of the moment, he has introduced both cost of living and now abortion rights as major pillars of his campaign. Similarly, in NH, Hassan immediately changed course after the Supreme Court struck down *Roe v Wade*.

As we said two weeks ago, moments change. Events happen. Great candidates run campaigns that plan for known and unknown challenges. They run campaigns that are **relevant**. They **listen**. They speak to the **issues that matter**. And, critically, they understand and **reflect the emotional moment**. Elections are, after all, an emotional exercise.

Dynamic campaigns develop a clear feedback loop with voters and opposition.

Dynamic campaigns **develop a clear feedback loop with voters and opposition**. They conduct regular opinion research and continuously update models. They judiciously but meaningfully react to what voters say at the doors and online (not everything deserves a reaction of course). Great candidates adapt to the moment without compromising their core components.



4 IN THE LONG RUN, INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES, NO MATTER HOW GREAT, PERPETUATE A BAD CYCLE FOR THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY.

Having great candidates is... great. But repeatedly relying on great candidates for success comes at a massive cost. Independent candidates are not party builders. They do not have coattails. Under Obama, Democrats lost 800+ seats in state legislatures across the country, more than any other President in 50 years. Under Obama, Democrats did not create Democratic voters. They created Obama voters.

Today, Kelly voters are Kelly voters, Warnock voters are Warnock voters, Fetterman voters are Fetterman voters. If these candidates win, they will not generate a wave of Democratic victories down-ballot. They will have won despite the party brand. And they will have to do it all over again next election, running separate from—or even against—their own party. 🌍

SEPT 20, 2022

7 WEEKS OUT:

How Could The GOP Lose This Thing?

One word: candidates. Good candidates—which we will talk about more next week—expand the terrain, even under the worst conditions. Bad candidates lose winnable elections. A bad candidate can snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

One word: candidates. Bad candidates lose winnable elections. A bad candidate can snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

And this is what we see here in 2022. The Republican field in 2022 is so poor that Senate Minority leader Mitch McConnell (chief architect of all things GOP in DC) is already making excuses, [citing](#) candidate quality for an expected poor showing in the Senate. **Specifically, Republican candidates in AZ, GA, OH, PA, and NH are polling below expectations and posting frankly pathetic fundraising numbers.** The GOP is even [pulling money out of some of these races](#) at a crucial time.

So how did we get here? How is it possible the GOP candidates are so bad that we've gone from "Red Wave" to "Dems are likely to hold the Senate?" Let's distill it down to 3 key elements.

1 THE TRUMP KISS... OF DEATH.

Donald Trump is the party's standard bearer; what he says, goes. While Trump's hold over the party's core voters is weaker than it once was, it's still the dominant force in the GOP. In US elections, to

become "the candidate," you must survive a primary election (i.e., a fight among multiple candidates from the same party). Voting is not compulsory here (Hi, Belgium!¹), and in these primary elections, the people who show up tend

to be the hard core supporters—the "party faithful." The "Big Lie" (that Biden stole the 2020 election) is an unshakeable truth for [7 in 10 Republicans](#). Thus, the modern GOP primary race is often a race for Trump's endorsement. Who can be the "Trumpiest" candidate?

In their effort to out-Trump each other, some candidates find themselves in too deep. **Not only are they bought-in to the Trump lore, they have gone so far**

as to mimic Trump. They have adopted his talking points, his style, even [his hand gestures and predilection for giving his opponents juvenile nicknames](#).

Not only are they bought-in to the Trump lore, they have gone so far as to mimic Trump. This violates one of the fundamental rules of good candidates—don't be something you're not.

To be sure, their Trump-aligned positions can hurt them in the general election, when it is not simply about catering to the base. **But Republican betrothal to Trump isn't why these Republican candidates are so bad.** In their desperate attempts to bottle the Trump magic, it has tipped over into Trump cosplay. And **this violates one of the fundamental rules of good candidates—don't be something you're not.**

1. ...and Australia, and Peru, and about 20 other countries. We see you!

2 VOTERS (USUALLY) SEE THROUGH INAUTHENTICITY.

Good candidates are a lot of things, but above all, they are authentic. Authenticity builds trust. By showing "who you really are," the authentic candidate answers questions before they are asked. **Authenticity forges connections and closes gaps.** Voters are much more likely to buy into the messages, promises, and (critically) motivations of candidates they feel they can trust.

Inauthenticity breeds skepticism. **Trump mimicry (and any other form of insincerity) can backfire for a candidate when it comes across as inauthentic.**

Several GOP candidates suffer from this inauthenticity of Trump mimicry. Two in particular ([J.D. Vance](#) in OH and [Dr. Mehmet Oz](#) in PA) have taken what should be slam dunk wins for the GOP during a Red Wave and turned them into possible—or even likely—Dem wins.

Dr. Mehmet Oz, who is running for the open seat in Pennsylvania, made his fortune selling "miracle cures" on television. But **(inauthenticity #1)**, [he doesn't even live in the state](#) he purportedly wants to serve, instead residing in a [New Jersey mansion](#) overlooking the Manhattan skyline. Dr. Oz's

attempts at being a man of the people have been laughable. One viral event involved him [going to a grocery store](#) to talk about rising prices, but **(inauthenticity #2)** mostly just revealed it has probably been years since he last prepared his own food. Another similar event has Oz visiting [a tourist-trap cheesesteak spot in Philadelphia](#) and **(inauthenticity #3)** passing it off as if it is something locals do. (They do not.)

For his part, J.D. Vance literally wrote the book on what upper crust Americans don't get about the white working class, but he can't shed that at his core he's a venture capitalist with an Ivy League law degree. While his gaffes haven't been as comical as Oz's, Vance has proven an inauthentic candidate, putting this race in reach for Dems. Voters are left to ask themselves, **if he's lying about himself, what else is he lying about?**

Oz, Vance, and others, took the easy route through a primary by pretending to be Trump. They hope simply to soak up his voters. In so doing, they sacrificed any chance at authenticity. This is now costing them dearly with the broader electorate. **That doesn't mean this is a done deal for Democrats. Hardly.** The GOP can still win these races by adhering to one of the fundamental rules of good campaigns—message discipline matters.

3 GOOD CAMPAIGNS LIVE IN THE MESSAGE BOX.

If authenticity is the most important trait for a candidate, message discipline is the most important trait for a campaign.

Karl Marx once wrote, “Men make their own history... but they do not make it under self-selected circumstances.” **The circumstances of today are all about the economy.** We are in an economic moment, and a campaign that can connect with voters—with their anxieties, their fears, their aspirations—on the economy is at a distinct advantage.

Put another way, [Republican strategists](#) know if they can make the election about the economy, they win. **If Oz, Vance, and the rest of the crew spend the next 7 weeks hyper-focused on the high cost of living and inflation, they have a good shot at overcoming their authenticity problems.**

Why? The economy is a ‘Republican’ advantage issue. We will talk more about this in a few weeks. For now, suffice it to say, Republicans regularly beat Democrats on ‘handling the economy’ [by double digits](#). ‘Good on the economy’ is part of

the Republican party’s brand, rightly or wrongly. **This element of the GOP brand is so strong, and cost of living is so prominent in voters’ minds, that this GOP advantage may yet outweigh their poor candidate quality.**

If Oz, Vance, and the rest of the crew spend the next 7 weeks hyper-focused on the high cost of living and inflation, they have a good shot at overcoming their authenticity problems.

To oversimplify (but only slightly), all Republicans really need to do is focus this cycle on who will make people’s lives better. ‘Are you better off now, after 2 years of Biden, than you were 4 years ago under Trump?’ **The question is disingenuous—but the truth doesn’t matter so much as the perception.**

That’s the message Republicans need, and if they can exercise message discipline, even their terrible candidates have a shot. **Message discipline doesn’t require complexity, it requires commitment.** It means having a message box the campaign uses (internally) to articulate its narrative. It means ensuring all facets of the campaign (social media, paid ads, candidate speeches, etc.) all read from the same narrative. It means having talking points that pivot every story back to this message box. It means practicing this skill of pivoting back on message.

In other words, it means being a traditional politician.

GOP voters supported these Trump acolytes during the primary elections precisely because they cosplayed Trump’s “non-traditional politician” schtick. But with 7 weeks to go, in order to win they will need to run exactly as a traditional politician would.

The irony is rich. Just like Dr. Oz. 🌍

Good candidates are, above all, authentic. Authenticity builds trust. Authenticity forges connections and closes gaps.

Inauthenticity breeds skepticism.

SEPT 12, 2022

8 WEEKS OUT:

Framing Your Thinking

The US is enormous—and so are its politics. Thus, we are going to focus on the US Senate. Right now, the Senate is evenly split 50-50 between the Democratic caucus and Republicans, and of the 35 races, [approximately 10 are competitive](#). Flipping just 1 seat will lead to significant domestic and foreign policy changes. While projections currently favor Democrats holding the Senate, members of the pundit class are rightly calling out [weaknesses in predictive models](#).

A lot will happen in the next two months. Most campaign spending comes in these final weeks, and voters finally start engaging more closely. Political spending in the US continues to break records, with 2022 set to see [nearly \\$10B in ad spending](#) alone—on track to become more expensive election than any election in history (2020's presidential election saw just over \$9B spent on ads). As the tides shift and some campaigns flag, they will take more risks. All this means we anticipate potentially big changes in the coming weeks.

Each week, we will focus on a particular tactic, strategy, or underlying pattern of interest. For better or worse, the outcome of this election will impact the world—and for the next 8 weeks, we hope to provide some useful analysis, information, or at least entertainment along the way.

At the outset of this series, we want to begin with some frameworks that often go overlooked.

1 THE US DOES NOT HAVE NATIONAL ELECTIONS. TO UNDERSTAND POLITICAL DYNAMICS, YOU MUST LOOK TO THE STATES.

Even in a Presidential year dominated by two personalities, **there is no single national election**. Administratively, all 50 states conduct elections differently. Politically, conditions vary state to state. Democrats in New York are different from Democrats in Arizona. Republicans in Montana are different from Republicans in Alabama. News reporting will often focus on a national 'generic ballot' between Democrats and Republicans, or the national standing of President Biden and party leaders. While these can be informative, they oversimplify and obscure reality.

Recent elections show the **folly of attributing national public opinion to US elections**: 2016 and 2020 national polling showed strong Democratic advantages, while state-based polling in each election showed tighter margins. State-level polling foreshadowed the 2016 Trump shock win and a narrower margin of victory for Biden in 2020. In the 2018 midterms, pundits suggested Democrats would retake the Senate with ease because of strong national standing. Instead, Democrats lost a net of 2 seats. A lot will happen in the next two months.

2 NATIONAL BRANDS—THOUGH NOT DETERMINATIVE—HAVE 3 IMPORTANT IMPACTS.

Biden and the Democratic Party as a brand are struggling. Even with recent improvements in Biden's standing, his job rating is still ~8 points lower than his 2020 vote share—a significant loss in a 2-party system.

The degree to which national brands matter is often overstated—again, it's 50 different state elections, not one national election. **National standing does have three important impacts on these state campaigns:**

While an unpopular national party or leader is not an excuse for a campaign's failure in a competitive US Senate race, the hyper-polarized environment in the US, coupled with the phenomenon of political 'self-sorting', means only about a third of these races are competitive

1. **Turnout:** Poor national ratings will depress your party's turnout locally and likely energize opposition voters.
2. **Transitive property:** National attributes accrue to state and local candidates. For example, if the national party has a perception as 'good on the economy' in an economic moment (like we are in now), that party's state and local candidates would stand on firmer ground on the issue, at least as a starting point. The opposite is also true. A national party perceived as weak on the economy would act as a drag on its state and local candidates.
3. **Tailwinds and lightning rods:** Popular national leaders can beat the party's drum, serving as a tailwind to boost the state-level candidates. Toxic national figures serve as lightning rods, attracting negative attention and reminding opponents of the risk of supporting that party's state-level candidates.

The impact national impressions have on individual campaigns is important,

but good campaigns can overcome them in a competitive environment. In 2016, Democrat Maggie Hassan (New Hampshire) defied the Trump wave and Democratic weakness, flipping a Senate seat. In Ohio, Democratic Senator Sherrod Brown uses an established brand independent of his party and national figures to consistently outpace Democratic Presidential candidates in a state increasingly supportive of Republicans. On the other hand, Democratic candidates in Florida struggle to differentiate themselves from toxic national party traits, which continues to serve Republicans well.

While an unpopular national party or leader is not an excuse for a campaign's failure in a competitive US Senate race, the hyper-polarized environment in the US, coupled with the phenomenon of political '[self-sorting](#)', means only about a third of these races are competitive (AZ, CO, FL, GA, NC, NH, NV, OH, PA, WI). In this environment, it is unthinkable that a Democrat would win in OK, or that a Republican would win in CA.

3 EVENTS AND CAMPAIGNS MATTER, RIGHT UP TO THE LAST MOMENT.

Early in the 2022 campaign cycle—a year ago—the assumption was a 'Red Wave' would sweep Republicans back into power in DC. Biden's agenda had stalled, the pandemic didn't go away as quickly as promised, and inflation loomed. The background context was bad for Biden and Democrats. Plus, applying history forward, a Red Wave would seem inevitable. With one exception, the party in the White House has lost seats in every midterm.

But, history is losing influence over the future. History matters; trends matter. But they do not predict outcomes.

Times have changed. Politics has become more partisan, more polarized. This itself is not new—we can point to moments of extreme partisanship and fraying democratic norms in the past. But it means that relying on trends from recent history to predict the outcome is a mistake.

As likely as not, the age-old '[October Surprise](#)' will dictate the outcome of an election these days. Recent history suggests we should expect an October Surprise, but we should not assume the outcome.

In the final months of the campaign in 2004, Democratic candidate, Sen. John Kerry, looked set to defeat George W. Bush. Then came the infamous [Swift Boat ad](#), a direct attack at the strongest asset of Kerry, a decorated war veteran. With the US fighting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and only 3 years removed from 9/11, security and strength were central to the debate. The attack ad landed, hard, and the Kerry campaign never truly recovered.

In 2016, we had two October surprises. First, a secret audio recording of candidate-Trump making derogatory remarks about women surfaced a month before the election. Trump's polling suffered. Then, 5 days before the election, FBI Director James Comey released a letter suggesting Hillary Clinton's Dept. of State emails were worth investigating. Campaign polling that weekend showed Clinton's support dropped by double digits overnight in key counties in swing states.

There have been a number of 'events' already this summer impacting the election's trajectory. Perhaps the highest-

profile one is the loss of national abortion rights when the Supreme Court struck down *Roe v. Wade*. This has energized Democrats (especially Democratic women), closing an enthusiasm gap

History is losing influence over the future. History matters; trends matter. But they do not predict outcomes.

with Republican voters and increasing Democratic voter registration. Later in the summer, the FBI's search of Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort may inject new enthusiasm in the Republican base,

regardless of how the investigation unfolds. We still have 8 weeks.

Few analysts are still predicting a Red Wave in November. Why? In the immortal (and debatably apocryphal) words of former British PM Harold MacMillan, "Events, dear boy, events!"

Midterm campaigns have spent the past 18 months laying the groundwork for these next 8 weeks. How campaigns navigate the unexpected, how they maintain or lose control over the narrative—that, more than claimed historical precedent—will determine who wins and loses on Election Day. 🌍

ClearPath Strategies provides research-driven strategies to leaders around the world. Our team is passionate about partnering with organizations in technology, politics, business, and progressive advocacy to solve their most pressing challenges. We use our decades of experience in campaign strategy to help organizations succeed.

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